



work

Johnny Vegas on his big acting break » Page 2

PLUS
graduate
career section
From the back page

Knowledge is power

Homebuyers now have their information packs - so what if you received a warts-and-all Job Information Pack before starting a new job? Ellie Levenson canvasses support for Jips

John Ham left his job at a big campaigning charity last year after just nine months. "It was only once I had started to experience difficulties with the role that I found out several other people had either failed their probation period or left the organisation shortly after starting. And it was only then that I discovered my team had been receiving training before I arrived ... for being dysfunctional."

It was, says Ham, a bit of a shock. "When I applied for the job it seemed like the perfect role for me. But what a huge disappointment when I got there. I had another job offer at the time - if I had known any of the history before starting I might have taken the other one."

As things stand, when you accept a job it's a case of "buyer beware". Employers are not compelled or obliged to tell potential employees of any cultural problems or previous issues that might impact on the role they are being offered. Yet this kind of information might not only stop people like Ham from having a miserable experience, but also encourage employers to put their houses in order.

What if, we thought, employers were compelled to offer a Job Information Pack (Jip) - just like the Home Information Pack (Hip) that a homeowner must hand out to prospective purchasers?

We put our Jip idea to Sarah Veale, head of equalities and employment rights at the Trades Union Congress, who agrees that more information would be useful before candidates accept a new job.

"Employers can and should do more to tell applicants about the kind of workplace they are applying to join," Veale says, adding that the kind of information needed goes beyond staff turnover and reasons for leaving.



"Female applicants would like to know whether sexual harassment is put down to 'harmless office banter' and if they will hit a glass ceiling as soon try to accommodate work with childcare. The expectation to do vast amounts of unpaid overtime on top of the hours stated in contracts is rarely mentioned before the first day at work. And no doubt plenty of budding applicants will be keen to find out whether participation in endless inane office banter about football, shoes and the gossip about staff from the floor below is compulsory."

Our idea found favour among some employers, too. Robin Lewis, a consultant and former group human resources director at retailer New Look, is in fa-

'Women could find out if they'll hit a glass ceiling by juggling work with childcare'

vor of giving people as much information as possible.

"As an employer, there is nothing more frustrating than losing a good recruit shortly after they've joined because they haven't found out enough about the business and find out it's not right for them," Lewis says. "I wouldn't want to give out hard facts about salaries and reasons for leaving but I'd be very happy to give more information about the culture, the working environment and career opportunities."

What do lawmakers think of our idea? Having a form of Jip would be particularly useful for people returning to work after a long period out of work, says John Penrose, Conservative MP for Weston-super-

Mare and a member of the work and pensions select committee.

"There's a cross-party consensus around getting people into sustainable work - which means that once they get a job, they keep it, rather than constantly switching back and forth between employment and benefits," Penrose says.

"People who are used to working know how they're going to cope with issues like childcare or travelling to work, but someone who's been out of work for a long time will need a lot of help to get everything set up and running smoothly. A package of support which included information on the challenges they're likely to face - for example, highlighting that childcare might be harder to get for a job that involved shift work - could be helpful as part of the sustainable employment agenda."

Our Jip idea also has support from another member of the work and pensions select committee, Tom Levitt, Labour MP for High Peak, although he would not wish to enforce it through legislation.

"The idea of a Job Information Pack is a very good one," Levitt says.

"Having got through the interview, too many people take up demanding positions with little idea of how their new workplaces actually work. An honest, warts-and-all introduction to the reality of the practices and politics of the workplace would help better integrate new employees, improve industrial relations and promote better productivity."

At present, employees have few rights if they leave or are sacked within the first few months of a job, explains John Quigley, head of employment at law firm William Sturges & Co. "So, from the employee's point of view, it would be a great advantage to receive a Jip giving them useful information about the new post," he agrees.

So thumbs-up all-round for the principle. But could Jips work in practice? To be of any value, says Quigley, a Jip would have to contain information such as your predecessor's resignation letter, any grievances lodged by them, information from their exit interview and copies of their appraisals.

Data protection issues might make this difficult - but the idea is not without precedent. The 2006 Tupe Regula-

tions, for example, oblige companies selling businesses to give purchasers "employee liability information" which includes details of all disciplinary and grievance proceedings in the previous two years. Unsuccessful job applicants are also entitled to request information about the other candidates for the job, the shortlisting criteria, and the reasons why the successful candidate was appointed.

Of course, introducing Jips wouldn't cure all ills. Colenzo Jarrett-Thorpe, a regional officer for union Unite, says many jobs don't work out because of breakdowns in the "psychological contract" rather than the actual contract of employment. "The psychological contract is the unwritten contract that exists in the heads of the employee and

'I thought I'd found my dream job, but my new manager was highly insecure'

employer about what they expect from each other."

But perhaps less should be left unsaid and unwritten. Compelling employers to give candidates more of the nitty-gritty would certainly have helped Samuel Fisher.

"I was offered what I thought was my dream job, working for a large, well-respected organisation in a newly formed team," Fisher recalls. "But very soon it became apparent that my manager wanted to be involved in every last detail of my work. She had never had a management job before and was incredibly insecure."

"It also became clear that I was caught in a power struggle between my manager and someone who had unsuccessfully applied for her job. After three months I left, but later I discovered that a significant number of people had also left the organisation in similar circumstances. But getting the information by that point was too late."

Have you had a similar experience? Do you think the idea of a Job Information Pack would work? Email us at work@guardian.co.uk